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CARLISLE'S GROWING PAINS

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REVENUE: Tax abatements on new homes + little commercial property = not enough money.

By JASON PULLIAM

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Tom Lane gets a bit nervous when he sits at his office table and unfolds a large conceptual map for a 217-acre development in southeast Polk County.

The Carlisle schools superintendent admits he is scared at times by the prospect of adding to his district more than 400 new homes and an estimated 600 children.

Lane and members of the Carlisle school board say they welcome development and new students, but it's becoming increasingly difficult to come up with money to build schools and take care of the ones they already have.

"We're kid rich and property poor," Lane said.

Carlisle school officials are trying to raise awareness among Des Moines city leaders about the challenges their district faces from the capital city's swift southeast-side development.

Rapid residential development in Des Moines' Easter Lake area has made it the city's fastest-growing area for several years, with many of the homes built in the Carlisle school district.

Carlisle is the state's fifth fastest-growing school district, but it ranks 363 out of Iowa's 365 districts for its per pupil tax valuation, according to the Iowa Association of School Boards.

Separate from operating budgets, property tax valuations determine how much school districts can borrow to pay for their facilities - new construction and renovation projects.

Iowa's average per pupil tax valuation is roughly \$219,000 and Carlisle's is \$115,000 - 52.5 percent of the state average. The gap is expected to widen, further hampering Carlisle's ability to build fast enough to keep pace with its growth.

Carlisle's pinch is complicated by tax-abated residential areas in southeast Des Moines and an anemic commercial tax base throughout the Carlisle school district.

The town of Carlisle is located about five miles southeast of Des Moines with a population of around 3,500.

Commercial and industrial property accounts on average for roughly 27 percent of school districts' taxable valuations statewide. The Carlisle school district's commercial and industrial properties make up just 16 percent of its tax base.

"They're just getting uniquely squeezed," said Larry Sigel, school finance director for the Iowa Association of School Boards.

Sigel likens Carlisle's current situation to that of nearby Norwalk and what the Waukee school district experienced 10 to 15

years ago.

Space crunch

The Carlisle school district has almost reached its \$9.9 million bonding ceiling with construction nearly complete on Carlisle Middle School, being built just off Iowa Highway 5.

About 400 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders will attend the new middle school this fall, giving the district a reprieve from its minor crowding issues.

"Five years from now, we're going to be right back where we are right now," Lane said.

Nearly 500, close to 30 percent, of the school district's 1,731 students come from parts of Des Moines and Polk County that fall within Carlisle's school district. Their numbers are expected to approach 600 when the 2007-08 school year begins and could reach 1,000 within several years.

Harvest Hills

A request from Mid-America Group to voluntarily annex and rezone 217 acres located at 3930 S.E. 72nd St. southeast of Des Moines first went before the Des Moines City Council on Jan. 22.

The project, known as Harvest Hills, proposes a large, mixed-use residential and commercial development to replace the existing cropland.

New southeast Des Moines residential developments generally pay no property taxes for five years.

Lane and Carlisle school board vice president John Judisch addressed council members last month to stress their district's need for more commercial ventures to round out its tax base.

"We weren't there to be adversarial," Judisch said. "We were there to say: 'Be mindful of how 400 homes might impact the Carlisle school district.' "

Roughly 13 acres within the Harvest Hills site is tapped for a potential Carlisle school site, but Lane says his district doesn't have the money to pay for the land or a new school right now. Mid-America Group considered donating the land to Carlisle schools if the district would contribute \$325,000 for streets and related improvements.

Discussions with the developer about the school site have been positive, but they are on hold for now, Lane said.

Several signs posted along the property that advertise the school site were removed. Ward 4 City Councilman Brian Meyer, who lives near the edge of the Des Moines and Carlisle school district boundaries, criticized the signs at a recent council meeting.

"I didn't want people to be misled into buying homes under the guise that a school would be there," Meyer said. "I knew it was not likely."

The council is slated to take up the Harvest Hills rezoning request again on Monday.

"There is a lot of interest in addressing the issue and bringing in some more businesses to help create the tax base the Carlisle school district needs," Meyer said.

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Photos by Lisa Fernandez/The Register:

Hailey Griffin, 9, lives in Des Moines but attends Carlisle school. The rapid development on Des Moines' south side is putting a strain on the Carlisle school district.

Students in Des Moines get on the bus to attend Carlisle schools. It will be five years before the district can collect property taxes on most new homes. The school district also has little commercial property, which affects its tax base and ability to build

new schools.

Students in Des Moines get on the bus to attend Carlisle schools. It will be five years before the district can collect property taxes on most new homes. The school district also has little commercial property, which affects its tax base and ability to build new schools.

Madison Clark, 12, of Des Moines gets her lunch and backpack ready for school. She's one of 500 kids who live in an area of Des Moines that's part of the Carlisle school district.

Hailey Griffin, 9, and Simon Clark, 7, both of Des Moines, head to the bus stop near their home in southeast Des Moines. The students live within Des Moines city limits but in the Carlisle school district.

Map: Carlisle school district

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